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MESO2025 - 11th International Conference on the Mesolithic in Europe

ORAL PRESENTATION

SESSION 2

S2

COLONISATION

Coordinated by Astrid J. Nyland and Graeme Warren

This session welcomes contributions that explore themes related to colonisation processes in the Mesolithic and Late Palaeolithic. This can involve several aspects and situations. Firstly, "pioneer" colonisation of previously uninhabited regions or specific areas, including mountainous/alpine regions, or islands or archipelagic landscapes. This may sometimes mean re-colonisation of areas deserted for differing periods of time. In such context, the potential "memory" of these earlier landscapes is an under-explored topic. Another related process involved migrating people entering (to them) new lands, but where people already lived. How are such meetings visible in the archaeological material and how does considering these meetings as a colonisation process help us understand them?

Colonisation processes need to be engaged with in different ways via the application of different methods, explanation models, and theoretical perspectives. Here are some potential questions to address: (i) Is "colonisation" an appropriate term to use to describe the processes by which people moved into new landscapes in European prehistory? (ii) How do various types of "mobility" fit with the concept of "colonisation"? (iii) What caused people to move to new lands? (iv) Can we identify "memory" of previously occupied landscapes? (v) Which climatic or environmental conditions push people out or make areas attractive? Are there limits to ecological conditions to where people choose to settle? (vi) Can we improve the chronological resolution of colonisation processes? (vii) How did people familiarise themselves with new territories, resources, and people? (viii) How are relations to new or old lands and people maintained or expressed? (ix) How can we differentiate between permanent moves into new land and seasonal exploitation of marginal landscapes? (x) How do new sources of evidence, such as genetic data, change our understanding of colonisation processes and how do we best combine data of different kinds?

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ORAL PRESENTATION

Thursday 18th September, h.09:00-09:15

S2

Migration, cross-cultural interaction, and re-colonisation in North and South East Norway at the Early to Middle Mesolithic transition

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Recent research has argued that a migration of Eastern European hunter-gatherers into the already populated Scandinavian Peninsula, was a contributing factor to changes in material culture at the transition from the Early to Middle Mesolithic c. 8500-8000 cal.BC. However, our understanding of this process, the possible cultural contact between Western and Eastern groups and how this may have impacted the sociocultural developments is still in its infancy. Through a first-hand analysis of macro tools (i.e. stone axes, adzes, and mace heads) from sites in North and South East Norway, Finland and North West Russia, new perspectives on how the eastern migration changed Mesolithic society has been gained. In Northern Norway, the migration process led to a coexistence and cross-cultural contact between people belonging to different traditions and origins. Over time, this resulted in a reorientation of social networks and profound changes in the cultural traditions. In South East Norway, the western groups were possibly displaced by the Lower Glomsjø flash flood, followed by a repopulation by eastern hunter-gatherers. With the migration and introduction of eastern groups and traditions, changes encompassed not only technological aspects, but also served as a catalyst for changes in social structures and the development of new social territories.

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A LAND BEYOND THE SEA: THE COLONISATION OF SARDINIA AFTER THE EVIDENCE OF THE SOMK SITE (9500-7800 CAL BP)

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During the LGM, Sardinia was part of the Sardo-Corsican massif, by then the largest Mediterranean island. When the sea level started to rise Sardinia separated from Corsica and progressively acquired the current conformation, remaining far away from the coasts of the Italian peninsula and continental Europe. The Pleistocene fauna was limited to a few endemic species, which were further reduced in the Early Holocene, when Prolagus sardus, an ochotonid the size of a hare, was the only sizable terrestrial mammal. Human presence is so far unproven before the Mesolithic, when a small number of sites attests to the colonisation of Sardinia and nearby Corsica. In Sardinia the largest archaeological record is from SOMK (i.e. S'Omu e Sorku), a collapsed rockshelter on the south-western coast. The stratigraphic sequence starts with undisturbed archaeological levels dated 9500 cal BP which are capped by multiple wildfire deposits (8900–7800 cal BP) and ends with a rockfall. The record includes lithic industry, fauna, ochre and burials with rich grave goods, the earliest such evidence in the island. The prehistoric groups, however, faced demographic isolation as well as abrupt environmental changes, as well documented at SOMK. In the long run, this Early Holocene colonisation and adaptation does not seem to have been successful, and there is no hint of continuity with the early Neolithic which appears several centuries after the last firm evidence of the Mesolithic.

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S2

Caves and rock shelters in southeastern Sweden

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Caves and rock shelters have historically exerted a significant attraction for humans, ranging from the earliest hunter-gatherer groups traversing the landscape to contemporary societies. In southeastern Sweden, approximately 100 caves and rock shelters have been identified. Archaeological investigations at some of these sites have predominantly revealed evidence of activities dating to the Mesolithic. This study, which focuses on caves and rock shelters in southeastern Småland, has undertaken systematic fieldsurveys to identify potential sites, with a primary emphasis on locating evidence of early human occupation. Particular attention has been directed toward sites situated above the post-glacial Baltic shoreline, with the aim of advancing knowledge about regions where hunter-gatherer groups likely established themselves following the retreat of the ice sheets approximately 12,000–13,000 years ago. The northernmost Late Paleolithic sites in the region are located near Finjasjön in northern Skåne (Götz & Carlie, 1983; Larsson, 1996). In southern Småland, a potential find of a Bromme projectile point has been documented (Westergren, 1979; Hansson, 1999). The regression of the Baltic Sea further resulted in the exposure of new landmasses, rendering them accessible for habitation. One such location is Blå Jungfrun, where archaeological finds beneath a rock shelter constitute evidence of settlement from the earliest phase of human occupation in the area. Our study also addresses the cultural and functional significance of caves within early hunter-gatherer societies. Were these sites primarily utilized as practical refuges, or were they imbued with symbolic or ritualistic meaning?

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Pioneers of the Alps: The Preboreal Mesolithic site Cascina Valmaione in the Central Alps (Lombardy, northern Italy)

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Excavations carried out in 1993 and 1994 at Cascina Valmaione in the central Alps of Valcamonica (Lombardy, northern Italy) have led to the discovery of several archaeological sites, one of which yielded a characteristic knapped stone assemblage attributed to the early Mesolithic Preboreal Sauveterrian cultural aspect. The attribution is reinforced by four charcoal radiocarbon dates which show that the site was settled around the middle of the 10th millennium uncal BP. The site is located in the centre of a wide mountain saddle that opens at 1778 m a.s.l., very close to the northern edge of a watering hole. The excavations uncovered ca 50% of the site. The finds consist exclusively of knapped stone artefacts and charcoals. Bones are absent due to the acidity of the mountain soil. Careful water sieving of the whole deposit led to the recovery of thousands of micro debitage items and some lithic artefacts that escaped the on-sight collection. The information inferred from the presence of the micro debitage help to understand the activity performed by the pioneer groups of hunter-foragers exploiting the high-altitude mountain environment. The preliminary analysis of the lithic raw material helps to reconstruct possible itineraries that these groups used to travel between the valley bottom and high altitudes.

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S2

Early Mesolithic pioneers on the shore of the Baltic Sea, 8000 BCE

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During the spring of 2020 archaeologists from the Swedish Historical Museums conducted an excavation of an early Mesolithic settlement in Lårbo outside Linköping, one of the oldest known sites in the region of Östergötland, Sweden. The settlement included a well-preserved dwelling with an associated floor layer containing finds of worked quartz, several flint blades and charred fish bones. The hut was dated to 8200-8000 BCE which represent the earliest possible phase of colonisation to the shores of this area and can thus be considered the mark of its very first inhabitants. The altitude, approximately 70 meters above sea level, places the settlement along the mouth of the river Svartån and directly on the shores of a virgin inner archipelago in the Baltic Sea basin, just risen out of the Ancylus lake. The Lårbo site is interpreted as a seasonal settlement with a suggested economy adapted to the colder months of the year. The structures, such as the post-supported hut, indicate an organized semi long-term use of the settlement. The flint blades demonstrate connections to southern or western regions of Sweden and could be seen as reflections of mobility and exchange patterns, suggestibly along the Baltic Sea coast during its Ancylus period.

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Shifting shores and early settlements: insights from Torsviken in Kolmården, Sweden

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The middle Mesolithic settlement of Torsviken in Kolmården, Sweden, belongs to the earliest established settlements of the region. It dates to c. 7500-7000 BC and consists of a dwelling and surrounding hearths and activity areas. The find assemblage consist mainly of worked quartz, quartzite and green stone which are locally retrieved raw materials. Despite being placed on a sandy beach next to the sea, the few remaining bones belong to land living animals such as deer. Kolmården is a forested area in eastern Sweden. After the retraction of the inland ice, c. 9600 BC, it consisted of an archipelago that eventually grew out to be a peninsula, surrounded by the Littorina sea. Torsviken is one of only three sites in Kolmården dated to c. 7500-7000 BC. Up until this time the landscape rapidly changed because of land rise, which caused the shoreline to move several kilometres in only a few hundred years. The other two sites, Böksjö and Gullvagnen, are located by smaller lakes, a few kilometres from the seashore. The location of the Böksjö and Gullvagnen sites, and the bones from land living animals from Torsviken indicate that people moved between the sea and the forested areas further in-land.

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The absolute chronology of Sauveterrian at Grotta del Romito (Southern Italy) in the context of the Early Mesolithic in Italy

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Abstract The transition between the Late Pleistocene and the Early Holocene is considered a moment of climate changes that drove people and faunal population to adapt to new environments. Grotta del Romito (Calabria, Southern Italy) is one of the most important Palaeolithic sites in the Italian peninsula which preserves an impressive stratigraphy spanning from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Early Mesolithic. In the rock shelter area, part of the stratigraphic sequence consists in an uninterrupted series of levels ranging from Final Epigravettian to Sauveterrian. A detailed series of radiocarbon dates places the emergence of Sauveterrian at Grotta del Romito at the beginning of the Preboreal confirming the early appearance of this technocomplex on the lower Tyrrhenian side as already suggested by the absolute chronology of Sauveterrian from Grotta della Serratura (Southern Campania). Starting from this point some main topics related to the rise and diffusion of Sauveterrian in Italy are discussed.

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'Villabruna', Epigravettians, and origins of the European Mesolithic

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'Villabruna', Epigravettians, and origins of the European Mesolithic. Robert George, Sydney Australia (Stockholm University (Sweden), University of Notre Dame (Australia)). Email: dr.robertg@gmail.com The Mesolithic has often been perceived as a relatively static period wedged between the Upper Paleolithic (UP), characterized by Early Human colonisation and climactic upheavals, and the Neolithic, associated with the arrival of Near Eastern farmers. The emerging paleogenetic data, however, paints a different reality. Mesolithic populations from western and central Europe have been shown to possess a striking similarity, and were subsumed within the 'Western Hunter Gatherers' (WHG) genetic cluster. This term was coined on the basis of analytical anteriority - the earliest published representative of the WHG cluster were from western Europe. However, the term is somewhat misleading, as WHG do not in fact descend from the preceding UP populations of Western Europe. The prevailing genetic origins of WHG is instead related to Late UP populations from Italy, typologically associated with the Epigravettian. This presentation will outline the possible 'migration routes' of the Late UP expansions which gave rise to Final Paleolithic and Mesolithic populations in central and western Europe and demonstrate distinctive clusters and social networks within the WHG meta-cluster. A final consideration will be given to the genesis of the pivotal Villabruna cluster. Although the paleogenetic record remains uneven, the ancestral Villabruna population does not appear to derive from any singular European UP population, but might have developed due to complex interactions which stretched from the Po-Adriatic plain to Eastern Europe.

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S2

Insights into highland colonization patterns in the south-eastern Alps: the Early Mesolithic camp-site of Prà Comun, Passo Giau - PC1 (Belluno Dolomites, Italy)

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The colonization of mountain areas is one of the major aspects of Mesolithic adaptations and it is a well-attested phenomenon in the Alps, especially in its southeastern side. Despite this and the numerous multidisciplinary studies carried out in the last decades, several questions remain open related to the variability of Mesolithic groups' settlement choices and their land use patterns. In recent years, the Belluno Dolomites have become a key area for discussing such issues. Among the several mapped sites, the rock-shelter of Prà Comun-Passo Giau (PC1 – 2,018m a.s.l.) is currently under excavation. Although partially disturbed by the following Early Middle Ages occupations, the Early Mesolithic layer of PC is unusually well preserved. Besides a rich lithic assemblage, it has yielded faunal remains, abundant wooden charcoals and some osseous tools and ornamental beads, a condition rarely found in highland sites and shared with the Mesolithic site of Mondeval de Sora, located a few kilometres south-eastward as the crow flies. Despite their proximity, these two sites are situated in fairly different locations. Through multidisciplinary studies involving geoarchaeology, archaeobotany, zooarchaeology, technological and use-wear analysis of bone and lithic artifacts, as well as spatial analysis, we aim to explore various aspects of settlement and subsistence strategies of the Mesolithic groups who occupied the site. These include the duration and intensity of occupation, exploitation of local faunal and vegetal resources, technological systems, and mobility, with the goal of highlighting the various factors related to occupation of the Alpine highlands.